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ABSTRACT

A study examined the impact of high school vocational education and training (VET) courses on small, rural communities in Tasmania (Australia). Data were gathered from site visits and interviews with school principals, VET coordinators, and VET students from three rural Tasmanian high schools. Findings show that the programs met the immediate training needs of current students, young adults seeking training to receive the Common Youth Allowance, and mature adults wanting to update their skills. The programs also provided opportunities for lifelong learning. Partnerships that evolved between schools and local employers to expand VET programs were recognized as important to community renewal. The need to travel to a major regional center to complete grades 11 and 12 was a major cause for high dropout rates among rural students. VET programs have partially redressed the lack of educational opportunities available to rural students and adults, and have improved previously low retention rates beyond grade 10. Benefits to participants included gaining training while living at home, gaining self-confidence before entering the workforce, and having access to work-based education. The presence of adult learners in the schools was a positive influence on school culture, providing valuable role models to younger and less motivated students. Factors responsible for the success of these programs included commitment and enthusiasm from principals, teachers, and senior staff; ability of schools to involve the local community; supportive educational environment; school culture that values adult learners; and flexibility to cater to individual needs. (TD)

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INTRODUCTION

Rural high schools have expanded their programs in recent years to include vocational education and training (VET) courses (Chiswell et al forthcoming). While VET in schools programs were established primarily to address the needs of Year 11 and 12 students, there has been an unexpected interest and participation by adults in these programs in Tasmanian rural schools. This suggests that the schools are filling a previously unmet need in small rural communities.

Adults participating in VET in schools programs fall into two distinct groups. They are young adults who must undertake further training to be eligible for the Common Youth Allowance and mature aged adults who are seeking training to upgrade skills or enter the workforce. Time and cost of travel are major impediments to these groups, and Year 11 and 12 students who are undertaking study in a regional centre (Chiswell et al forthcoming).

This study examines three rural schools in Tasmania to understand why VET programs have been established, what makes them work, and the initial outcomes for students and schools.

The role of the schools in the study has changed to embrace lifelong learning for the community. Two factors have contributed to the change to the new role. First, the vision of school leaders and second, their success in implementing major changes that extend beyond the school. These changes have affected the perceptions of the school held by staff, students and members of the wider community.

BACKGROUND

Policy context and VET in schools

The Australian national vocational education and training strategy, *A Bridge to the Future* (Australian National Training Authority, 1998) states that to improve international competitiveness, to foster economic growth and to increase productivity, Australia must build its national stock of skills. Further, adults will be expected to update their vocational skills and to acquire new ones. The strategy recognises that access to opportunities for adults to undertake further education and training is limited for those living in rural communities, and states that initiatives are needed to offer learning pathways to equity groups, including people in rural and remote communities.

Vocational education and training in schools is recognised by national VET policy documents such as *A Bridge to the Future* as a way of addressing the training needs of young people making the transition from school to work.

Benefits for students associated with VET in schools programs include assistance with employment-related decisions, improved knowledge and understanding of industry and the world of work, increased self awareness, and improved personal and interpersonal skills (Misko 1999).

Research has identified a number of factors which foster and support VET programs in schools (Chiswell et al forthcoming, 4). They relate to commitment to VET reflected in the school's objectives and goals, availability of school and community resources, local development to meet local needs and partnerships with the community and other schools.

Educational disadvantages for rural students

Lower retention rates for rural students to Year 12 as compared with their urban counterparts contributes to a disadvantage for entry and completion of post compulsory education (Cunningham et

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al 1992, Lamb et al 1998). Factors contributing to lower retention rates for rural students include not valuing formal education, the need to travel to access final years of schooling in some states, curriculum which is not attractive to rural students, and lower expectations of academic achievement (Cunningham et al 1992).

Rural Australians are less likely to have post-school qualifications than those in metropolitan areas, and are less likely to have university level qualifications. Those people with lower levels of education experience more unemployment and are less likely to undertake further study due to lack of confidence in their ability as learners in formal training situations (Kilpatrick & Bell 1998).

Schools and rural community development

Rural schools are a central focus of activity within small rural communities, both for school-aged children and adults (Miller 1995). Indeed, closure of the local school can be a factor in the demise of small communities (Jolly & Deloney 1996). Schools can contribute not only to the education of young people, but also to the economic and social development of a local community. As part of the community development process, linkages between community members are fostered, allowing opportunities for the development of a community's social capital. Schools can play an important role in developing these linkages. As one of a limited number of institutions present in rural communities, schools have the potential to become a focus for building social capital through facilitating networks and sharing expertise with the wider community (Falk & Kilpatrick 2000).

Establishing VET in rural schools provides an opportunity to assist with the creation and enhancement of links between people living in rural communities. There is enormous potential for developing mutually beneficial partnerships between schools, local businesses and regions/regional industries. Leadership plays a major role in creating effective school-community partnerships (Johns et al 1999).

There are a number of innovative programs in Australia, jointly established by schools, local business and community members which have led to a reinvigoration of local economic activity and a re-engagement of local youth in meaningful work. In some localities, there has been a pathway established which leads students through school VET programs to post school training and into local industries (CRLRA 2000).

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on data collected from several site visits and interviews with school principals, school VET coordinators, VET students, and a regional VET coordinator in rural Tasmania. Interviews were based on a semi structured questionnaire and were conducted in 1999 near the end of the school year. Questions were formed following identification of gaps in research literature on rural VET in schools programs.

Three district high schools were selected purposefully. The researchers were attempting to identify schools in small rural communities, with either a stable or declining population and limited youth employment opportunities which had established a VET in schools program. Each of the study sites selected was centred on a town population of less than 700 people in order to explore VET in schools programs in small rural communities.

ABOUT THE SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

VET programs in Tasmanian schools are structured to provide nationally accredited qualifications and delivered by schools which are Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). The three schools selected were all located in northern Tasmania. The schools had between 150 and 500 pupils and between 14 and 30 staff. The schools were located in towns with populations ranging from 190 to 640. The major industries in the area surrounding the towns included forestry, viticulture, cropping, grazing, dairying and tourism. The distance to the nearest major regional centre ranged from 110 kilometres (study site 1) to 35 kilometres for study sites 2 and 3.

Study site 1 has now run the VET program for two years, with seven students enrolled in 1998 and 11 in 1999. The ages of students ranged from 16 to 40 years. At study site 2, the course has run for one year only with eight students enrolled. In addition, there were up to 30 students participating in the

computing class, including mature age men and women. At study site 3 there were nine students enrolled in the VET program with ages ranging from 16 to 30 years.

The three district high schools offered a variety of VET courses. The schools delivered most of the courses, but also were auspicing agencies, providing support to students taking courses through other training organisations. The schools all demonstrated the development of some innovative partnerships with other schools and organisations, including a private community service organisation, to provide new opportunities for expansion of programs.

Two of the three schools underwent the rigorous accreditation process to become a Registered Training Organisation (RTO). The third school was working in partnership with two other rural schools to gain accreditation as a joint RTO. This process was seen to embed the 'cluster' arrangement, promoted by the regional coordinator. Clusters facilitate cooperation and sharing of resources amongst three or four schools within the same region, and give a wider choice of subjects for students.

Results

Why do these schools have VET programs

In 1997, the Tasmanian Education Department funded a three-year project to employ regional VET coordinators covering all rural areas of the state. The goal of this project was to improve retention rates of students post Year 10 in rural schools. In Tasmania, most district high schools have not until recently offered Years 11 and 12. Students from these small rural schools had to move to larger regional centres to undertake the final years of schooling. In 1998, the retention rate from Year 10 to Year 11 in the northern region of Tasmania was 66.4% (Department of Education 1998). Retention rates from district high schools were lower than the average for the region.

Not all rural high schools in Tasmania have VET in schools programs. The establishment of VET programs depends on the initiative of school principals and senior staff in each school. There was little financial incentive to establish these programs. Even with the assistance of the regional VET coordinator, there was much work for the school to initiate such programs.

One motivator was the consistent and worrying pattern of students who left home, moved into the regional centre and subsequently 'dropped out' of senior secondary college within the first 3 months, to return home to almost certain unemployment or under employment. Up to 50% of students returned to their home town in two of the study sites before completing Year 11. The difficulties for the students and their families relate to relocation of 15 and 16 year old students to a new school in a large town. The Year 11 and 12 students who did enrol in VET programs at the schools tended to have poor literacy, numeracy, social and communication skills, suggesting that had they enrolled in senior secondary college they would have been at risk of dropping out.

The schools in the study have also seen a need to provide education for local adults. VET programs provide accessible education for two quite different groups in the local community. The first group comprises young adults receiving the Common Youth Allowance who were required to undertake further training to be eligible for the allowance. Enrolling in a VET program at the local school provided a means of undertaking training without the cost and time associated with travelling into town.

The second group was mature aged people in the local community who were either employed or involved in home duties and who were seeking further qualifications to develop new career opportunities or enter the workforce. This group had few opportunities for further training due to constraints of time, childcare responsibilities and/or existing work commitments to be able to attend courses in the regional centre. In the study sites, there were a number of adults enrolled in a VET course or a Tasmanian Certificate of Education (TCE) subject at the local school.

Opportunities and challenges for the schools

There was considerable enthusiasm from staff and students for the programs and for expansion in the future. The school principals and coordinators in the three study schools had a shared vision of playing a more strategic role in community renewal and development through partnerships with other schools, post secondary education providers and local business and local government. They communicated this vision to their staff, students, parents and the wider community.

In the short term, there was a recognition of the need to consolidate on the learning that had taken place since the first intake of students. In the medium to long term, senior staff from the study schools identified a number of opportunities including: establishing the school as the state centre for training in specialised horticulture, delivering employer sponsored training courses for employees, offering a wide rage of courses through online delivery, sharing resources with other rural based training organisations, and linking a number of schools-based Skills Centres to form a 'virtual' VET college to deliver courses nationally.

The challenges to growth and expansion related to resourcing within schools. The schools in the study reported a high turnover of staff, and indicated that the loss of one teacher can have a significant ripple effect on others' teaching loads. The development of credibility for the program with local employers depended very much on the relationships which were built by VET staff. Continuity of staff was important to ensure the relationships were maintained, particularly in the development phase.

A broad range of skills for effective delivery of VET were identified by staff. Indeed, it was clear that there was a need for a 'team' approach to satisfy not just the technical dimension of courses, but also skills in liaising and understanding business needs, adult education and teaching skills, and personal development and confidence building skills.

The need for the retention of a regional coordinator was identified as important to sustain momentum in the development phase of these programs. The need for a strong commitment from joint school and industry management committees was also identified. School staff indicated that these committees were not yet working to their potential. Communication of the vision of the school as a focus for learning for the whole community is an on-going challenge.

Outcomes

For all students interviewed, there were positive outcomes following participation in VET programs. The Year 11 and 12 students and the young adults claimed that they had gained specific work skills as well as personal self-confidence and self belief in their ability to enter the workforce.

For one student, it was the first time she had actually enjoyed her school experience. She reported that her attitude to learning had changed and she was able to make the link between learning at school and working. Graduates from the first year of the program at the one school now in its second year of VET had either found work or gone on to further study. Not all students were successful in their course. Those who enrolled only in order to be eligible for the Youth Allowance were most likely to drop out.

Though the numbers of students in this study were small, there has been a dramatic improvement in retention rates. In one of the schools, the post Year 10 retention rate has risen from 50% to 100%. The introduction of the VET program was attributed by students and the school as the reason for the increased retention rate. The programs have assisted schools to enhance their viability in communities where the local population was static or declining. Resource policies from the education system mean schools must retain and attract students in order to offer a broad academic program.

What made it work

The staff emphasised the importance of a commitment by the school and particularly the principal. There was a strong desire amongst staff to make the program work, even though it frequently required additional work. While local businesses were generally supportive of the program, through offering sites for work placements to students, the schools, not the businesses, were drivers for the development of VET in schools.

Building relationships between the VET staff, the school generally and local businesses is essential for the development the VET program. Establishing the credibility of the VET staff, the program and the participating students was an important element of this. One school trying to foster links with the local viticulture industry, for example, ensured that each local business owner or manager received a personal visit and information about VET.

Support from parents was necessary for the program to be successful. In one of the schools, several parents enrolled themselves in the first year to ensure there were adequate numbers for the program to commence. It was seen as important that the principal and VET staff understand the needs of

parents and the students in relation to the students' home life, the students' capacity to cope away from home and parents' expectations of their children.

Small class sizes allowed teachers to provide an individualised approach to cater for different goals of each student. The ability to be flexible to accommodate individual needs was a strength of the program in rural schools. There was a recognition by staff that they were there to help develop the 'whole' person. Work on helping students build self esteem and confidence was considered as important as the development of work skills. The staff became 'mentors' for other aspects of students lives, offering help with both school and non-school issues. Staff acknowledged the difference between the VET group and other students by treating them as adult learners. This contributed to a view that the VET group was distinct from the main body of school students.

From the students' perspective, there was support for the teachers and their approach. They liked being treated as adults and thinking of the teachers as friends. They saw teachers as committed and enthusiastic. They commented on the importance of the practical nature of the study and for some, the ability to work and study outdoors (in the case of agriculture and horticulture). Staff and students saw the diversity of ages of students in the class as a positive benefit. The small size of the VET cohort and the fact that the students supported each other contributed to the sense of belonging. The mature age students commented on the ease of access to the classes, the low cost and the relevance of the courses.

The credibility associated with receiving a nationally recognised credential was important to the students and the schools. It gave the schools confidence to promote the VET program, with the knowledge that the Certificate's awarded to the students would be acceptable to industry as having equal status with Certificates gained through other training institutions.

Discussion

The enthusiasm and commitment of the school principal and senior staff play a vital role in the establishment and development of VET in schools programs and enrolment of adult learners in rural schools. The programs met the immediate training needs of individuals and provided opportunities for lifelong learning in the three rural communities. The vision of school leaders (principals and senior staff) w[illegible] broaden the role of the schools beyond the education of school-aged children to be promoters o[illegible] learning for the whole community. The communities have responded by embracing VET in schools in ways not encountered in urban areas.

Local employers recognised the benefits of partnerships with schools, one of which was a local skilled labour force trained through VET in schools programs. Partnerships evolve between schools and local employers, sometimes facilitated by local government, to expand school VET programs. Community, local government and local Members of Parliament recognised and supported the role of school VET programs in community renewal.

Rural schools use VET in schools programs to improve previously poor retention rates beyond Year 10 (Department of Education 1998). The programs have partially redressed the lack educational opportunities available to rural students. The need to travel to a major regional centre to complete Years 11 and 12 and the costs and time associated with this are a major cause for high drop out rates for country students (Cunningham et al 1992). There are limited educational opportunities for adults in the communities, reflected in low levels of post-school qualifications, low participation in the workforce and increased chances of under employment or unemployment (McClelland & McDonald 1999, Curtain 1999, Lamb et al 1998).

In this Tasmanian study, the programs were meeting the educational needs of several groups in the community in addition to Year 11 and 12 aged students. Young adults required to undertake training to receive the Common Youth Allowance, but unable or unwilling to travel to a regional centre had enrolled in the VET in schools program. Mature age students wanting to update their skills to gain entry to the workforce also enrolled at the schools.

There were clear benefits for the individuals who participated in the program. The key benefit identified was that the individuals gained self confidence and bolstered their self esteem before entering the workforce. The supportive nature of the program delivery was principally responsible for this. There were also the more obvious benefits including gaining training while still residing at home

and having access to practical work-based education which enabled participants to link learning at school to working.

Students who would otherwise have left school to an uncertain employment future have continued their education. Similar benefits were identified by Misko (1999), but personal development was more important for the rural students here than in Misko's study. For mature aged students, ease of access and low cost provided an opportunity to gain new skills to enter the workforce.

The programs have assisted schools to offer a broad academic program at the school by raising student numbers and attracting staff with a range of skills. In addition, the presence of adult learners was a positive influence on school culture, providing valuable role models to younger and less motivated students.

The factors identified for successful provision of post-compulsory programs for both adults and young people in rural schools were: commitment and enthusiasm from teachers and senior staff; ability of the school to involve the local community; a supportive educational environment; a school culture that recognises and values adult learners; and the flexibility to cater for individual needs. All of these factors can be linked to the professional expertise of the school staff and the skills of the school leaders in sharing their vision with the community, both within and outside the school. These are consistent with Chiswell et al's (forthcoming) conditions for the success of VET in schools programs which emphasise commitment of the school and partnerships with the local community.

The schools identified a number of areas for expansion of delivery to post-school aged students. On-line delivery and linkage with school based 'skills centres' was seen as an important avenue for development. This would facilitate auspicing of programs offered by other providers, thus giving students in a much greater range of programs the support needed to ensure success (Kilpatrick & Bell 1998).

Conclusion

VET programs in rural Tasmanian schools are filling a previously unmet need for education from adults and young people of post-compulsory school age.

Expansion of the role of the schools was resource intensive. This research noted the value of appropriate teacher styles and relationships with the students, highlighting the need for professional development of teachers unfamiliar with working with adult learners. As well, professional development of teachers and VET coordinators to develop skills for interacting with people in the workplace and developing networks in the local community was required. Many of the things that make the program work were related to small, resource intensive, class sizes.

The impact of the VET programs on the community and local businesses is an area for future research. VET in schools programs increase the contact between schools and the community beyond traditional forms of association. This development of new networks plays an important role in building social capital in local communities (Falk & Kilpatrick 2000). Making school resources and expertise accessible for use by community members through community education programs provides an important means of building new relationships with adults in the broader community. The experiences, expertise and role modelling they bring into the school environment will assist in changing the nature and role of rural schools, making them even more relevant and valuable to their communities.

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